

After that, I would say, and I think all who support that war must admit, that mistakes were made on our side—some of them big—and the difficulties in Iraq increased. As others have said before me, the war in Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein may have been a war of choice. It is now a war of necessity. We must win it.

Why? Because the consequences of an American retreat and defeat there would be terrible for the safety and security of the American people at home whom we have a constitutional responsibility to protect.

I must say I also approach these two amendments with a sense of legislative history. They evoke debates that have occurred many times in the Senate. We had one just a decade ago on this floor, about how long our Armed Forces should stay in Bosnia. Some wanted to set a deadline for withdrawal, a date. Others, including myself, argued successfully that setting a day for automatic withdrawal was dangerous and wrong because it would discourage our allies and encourage our enemies. Our withdrawal should be consistent with the achievement of the goals we have set for the mission.

I remember in that debate quoting Biblical wisdom and warning, “If the sound of the trumpet is uncertain, who will follow into battle?”

I suppose in our time we might amend that to say, “If the sound of the trumpet is uncertain, who will stay in battle?”

I also remember arguing in that debate that a nation, I thought, should only set an unconditional date, a deadline for withdrawing troops from battle, if all hope of victory was lost, which it was not then in Bosnia and is not now in Iraq, unless the consequences of a too early American withdrawal by calendar instead of condition were acceptable to our country, which it was not. They were not then in Bosnia and are not now in Iraq.

The Kerry-Feingold amendment directs that all American troops be withdrawn from Iraq by the middle of next year, regardless of the intervening events. The Levin amendment is more complicated. I have spent some time studying it since it was made public on Monday. The Levin amendment directs that a withdrawal of American troops from Iraq begin by the end of this year, 2006, without regard to the conditions on the ground.

So, for that reason, consistent with what I have just said about legislative history and my own previously stated strong position, I cannot support either of these amendments.

I personally hope, as I am sure all Members of the Senate do, and I believe, that we will be able to withdraw a significant number of Americans in uniform from Iraq by the end of this year and even more by next year. I express that optimism based on the election and formulation of the new Iraqi unity Government, the increasing capacity of the Iraqi security forces to

protect their own people, and the commitment of the new Government to disarm the sectarian militias.

General Abizaid and General Casey have said that it is their hope to begin withdrawing more troops by the end of 2006 and even more next year. But I want them to decide based on the realities on the ground in Iraq, not on their hopes or my hopes or the shared hopes of the American people that we will soon be able to bring our Armed Forces home from Iraq. I do not want those distinguished American generals and the brave and steadfast American men and women serving under them to be directed by this Congress to exit before they conclude and recommend to us and the President that withdrawal is justified.

My own opinion is that the sooner the Iraqis take control of their own defense and destiny, the better it will be for them and for us. But if we leave too soon, it will be disastrous for them and for us.

Sponsors of the Kerry-Feingold amendment have stated a very clear and direct purpose. I disagree with it. The sponsors of the Levin amendment have argued on behalf of their amendment that they believe we must direct the beginning of a withdrawal of American troops without condition by December 31 of this year to make clear to the Iraqis that our commitment to them is not open-ended. I believe the Iraqis know very well that our commitment is not open-ended and is not a blank check. I will tell you that I personally have said that to their leaders directly, every time I have met them here or there. I know many of my Senate colleagues of both parties and leaders of the administration have said the same, openly and directly to the Iraqi leaders and the Iraqi people. And the Iraqis themselves have said over and over again that they know our commitment is not unconditional.

Just yesterday, in an op-ed piece in the Washington Post by the National Security Adviser of Iraq, he made clear that his Government wants the American military out of Iraq as much as we want our men and women to come home to America.

He and the rest of the Iraqi leadership doesn't need a congressional directive to convince them of the desirability of American forces leaving Iraq.

What will be lost by it? I will answer that in a moment.

I will say that in the interest of Iraq's security and ours, it should only happen—that is, our withdrawal—as the Iraqis step by step are more and more ready to stand on their own.

The amendment introduced by Senator LEVIN itself states that the Iraqis are making good progress in exactly that direction. The amendment itself reports more than two-thirds of the operational Iraqi Army combat battalions “are now either in the lead or operating independently.”

That is significant progress.

A national unity government has been formed. It took too long, but that

also is an enormous achievement. But, of course, there is much more work yet to be done—as the Levin amendment itself states, to amend the Iraqi constitution to get more help from international donors and to “promptly and decisively disarm the militias and remove those members of the Iraqi security forces whose loyalty to the Iraq government is in doubt.”

But then the amendment goes on to direct the beginning of withdrawal of American forces by the end of this year regardless of whether that work is done or those militias are disarmed.

That is where I respectfully believe it errs.

In doing so, I feel that this amendment would just underline the message the Iraqi leadership has clearly already received, accepted, and shares; that America's military commitment to Iraq is not open-ended and unconditional. I fear that it would also send another message to our terrorist enemies and to the sectarian militias in Iraq that America is not prepared to see this fight through until the Iraqis themselves can take over. That will actually encourage the terrorists to accelerate their cruel and inhumane attacks, and it will unsettle the sectarian groups to hunker down and rearm their militias to strengthen themselves for the civil war that they feel will follow a premature American retreat. And that might well create conditions that none of us want, which is to say chaos and civil war in Iraq, regional war in the Middle East, and the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 being able to claim victory in Iraq and going on, emboldened, to attack us again here at home and to bring their terrorism to more Arab countries in the Middle East.

That is why I said the war in Iraq, however one thinks we got there, is now a war of necessity, a war we must help the people of Iraq to win or the security of we, the people of America, our children and grandchildren will be gravely endangered.

Section 2 on page 4 of the amendment which the Senator from Michigan introduced says:

The current open-ended commitment of United States forces in Iraq is unsustainable.

As I have said, our commitment is not and should not be open-ended. It is conditional on the Iraqis working hard to move themselves forward together on the path to self-government and self-defense and, in fact, as the amendment states, they are doing. And this conditional commitment of ours to them is surely militarily sustainable and must be honored.

The failure to do so I believe would have terrible consequences for our credibility in the world and our success in the long conflict ahead against the radical Islamist terrorists who declared war against us and much of the rest of the world during the 1990s and carried out a brutal act of war against our people on September 11, 2001.